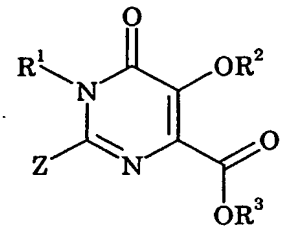
CLAIMS:

1. A compound of formula (I) below, or a pharmaceutically acceptable salt thereof:



(I)

wherein

Z represents C_{2-6} alkynyl, aryl or heteroaryl, any of which groups may be optionally substituted;

R^1 represents C_{1-6} alkyl or aryl(C_{1-6})alkyl, either of which groups may be optionally substituted;

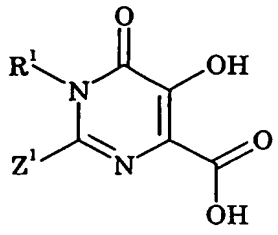
R^2 represents hydrogen; or C_{1-6} alkyl, C_{2-6} alkylcarbonyl, aryl, arylcarbonyl, heteroaryl, aryl(C_{1-6})alkyl or heteroaryl(C_{1-6})alkyl, any of which groups may be optionally substituted; and

R^3 represents hydrogen, C_{1-6} alkyl, C_{3-7} heterocycloalkyl(C_{1-6})alkyl, di(C_{1-6})alkylamino(C_{1-6})alkyl, C_{2-6} alkylcarbonyloxy(C_{1-6})alkyl or C_{3-7} cycloalkoxycarbonyloxy(C_{1-6})alkyl;

for use in therapy.

2. A compound of formula (I) as defined in claim 1, or a pharmaceutically acceptable salt thereof; provided that, when Z is unsubstituted phenyl, then R^1, R^2 and R^3 do not each simultaneously represent methyl.

3. A compound as claimed in claim 2 represented by formula (III) below:



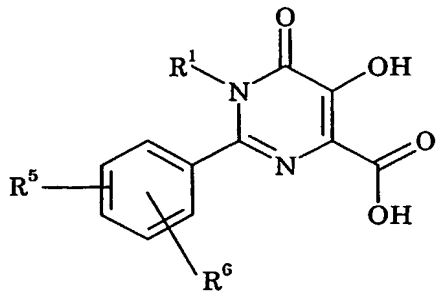
(III)

wherein

Z^1 represents optionally substituted aryl; and

R^1 is as defined in claim 1.

4. A compound as claimed in claim 3 represented by formula (IV):



(IV)

wherein

R^1 is as defined in claim 1; and

R^5 and R^6 are each independently selected from hydrogen and a substituent group of formula (II):

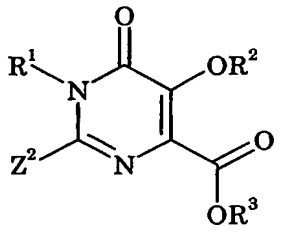
$$-X-R^4 \qquad (II)$$

in which

X is selected from -NH-SO_2-, -NH-SO_2-NH-, -CH_2-SO_2-, -SO_2-NH-, -NH-CO-NH-, -NH-CS-NH-, -NH-CO-O-, -NH-CO-, -CO-NH-, -NH-CO-NH-SO_2-, -NH-CO-NH-CO-, -O-, -S-, -SO-, -SO_2-, -NH-, -CH_2-, -CH_2O- and -CH_2S-; and

R^4 represents aryl, aryl(C_{1-6})alkyl, C_{3-7} cycloalkyl, C_{1-6} alkyl, heteroaryl(C_{1-6})alkyl, C_{3-7} heterocycloalkyl or C_{2-6} alkenyl, any of which groups may be optionally substituted.

5. A compound as claimed in claim 2 represented by formula (X) below:



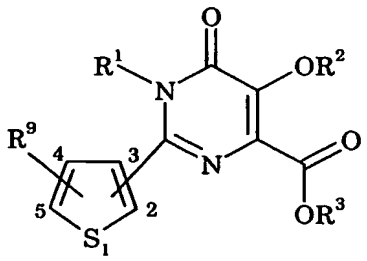
(X)

wherein

Z^2 represents optionally substituted heteroaryl; and

R^1, R^2 and R^3 are as defined in claim 1.

6. A compound as claimed in claim 5 represented by formula (XI) below:



(XI)

wherein

R^1, R^2 and R^3 are as defined in claim 1; and

R^9 represents hydrogen or a group of formula (II) as defined in claim 4.

7. A compound selected from Example Nos. 1 to 46, or a pharmaceutically acceptable salt thereof.

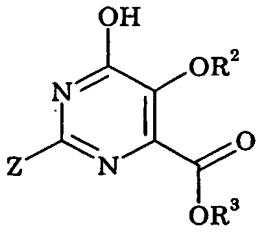
8. A compound selected from Example Nos. 47 to 49, or a pharmaceutically acceptable salt thereof.

9. A pharmaceutical composition comprising a compound of formula (I) as defined in claim 1, or a pharmaceutically acceptable salt thereof, in association with a pharmaceutically acceptable carrier.

10. The use of a compound of formula (I) as defined in claim 1, or a pharmaceutically acceptable salt thereof, for the manufacture of a medicament for treatment or prevention of infection by hepatitis C virus.

11. A process for the preparation of a compound of formula (I) as defined in claim 1, which comprises:

(A) reacting a compound of formula (XIV) with a compound of formula (XV):



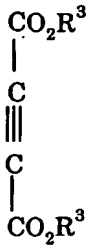
(XIV)

$R^1—L^1$

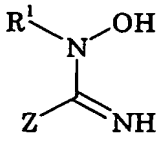
(XV)

wherein Z, R^1, R^2 and R^3 are as defined in claim 1, and L^1 represents a suitable leaving group; or

(B) reacting a compound of formula (XVIII) with a compound of formula (XIX):



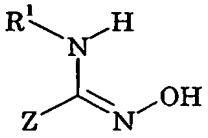
(XVIII)



(XIX)

wherein Z, R^1 and R^3 are as defined in claim 1; followed by cyclisation of the intermediate thereby obtained; or

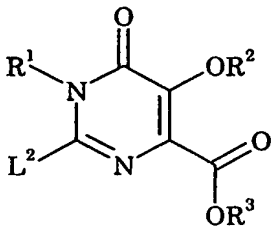
(C) reacting a compound of formula (XVIII) as defined above with a compound of formula (XX):



(XX)

wherein Z and R^1 are as defined in claim 1; followed by cyclisation of the intermediate thereby obtained; or

(D) reacting a compound of formula Z-$B(OH)_2$ with a compound of formula (XXII):



(XXII)

wherein Z, R^1, R^2 and R^3 are as defined in claim 1, and L^2 represents a suitable leaving group; in the presence of a transition metal catalyst; and

(E) subsequently, if required, converting a compound of formula (I) initially obtained into a further compound of formula (I) by standard methods.

12. A method of inhibiting hepatitis C virus polymerase and/or of treating or preventing an illness due to hepatitis C virus, the method involving administering to a subject suffering from the condition a therapeutically or prophylactically effective amount of a compound of formula (I) as defined in claim 1, or a pharmaceutically acceptable salt thereof.